

Rep. Peter Welch late last week voted against legislation that would subject Vermont family farmers, small businesses and artisan food producers to unreasonable fees.

The Food Safety Enhancement Act (H.R. 2749) would prevent food-borne illnesses by increasing the number and scope of food inspections - but would do so at the expense of small food producers. The bill unfairly subjects Vermont farmers, maple syrup producers and cheese-makers to the same \$500 annual registration fee as large, multi-state agri-businesses.

Welch worked to amend the bill to create a sliding fee scale which would take into account the size of a business. While Welch was successful in reducing the fee from \$1,000 to \$500, he argued that the flat fee still unfairly penalizes small producers.

"We must protect the quality, reliability and safety of the food we eat, but we should not do so at the expense of entrepreneurial, small food producers whose products are so important to Vermont's economy," Welch said. "It is fundamentally unfair to charge companies like Greensboro's Jasper Hill Farms and Jeffersonville's Vermont Maple Outlet the same fees charged to PepsiCo and ConAgra. As this bill continues through the legislative process, I intend to work to improve it to protect consumers while treating small businesses fairly."

Jasper Hill Farms, a cheese-maker with five fulltime workers and \$600,000 in annual sales, and the Vermont Maple Outlet, with four part-time workers and \$350,000 in sales, will face the same fees as PepsiCo, with \$43 billion in sales, and ConAgra, with \$11 billion in sales.

Welch's amendment would have allowed small companies like Jasper Hill Farms and Vermont Maple Outlet to pay as little as \$50 in fees, while PepsiCo and ConAgra would face up to \$1,000 in fees.

Vermont Secretary of Agriculture Roger Allbee hailed Welch's work to amend the bill and his vote against it.

"While we are all concerned about food safety, this critical issue deserves closer scrutiny to put legislation in place that addresses important issues such as integration between federal, state and local governments, and to ensure adequate training and funding for inspection authorities," Allbee said. "We also have to take into consideration the expense and regulatory burden to our

farmers. I fully support Congressman Welch's decision to vote against the legislation as it has been proposed. A vote against this bill is not a vote against food safety but a recognition that this very important issue deserves further scrutiny and transparency."

David Rogers of the Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont agreed.

"Congressman Welch has worked hard in recent weeks to ensure that this bill would address the nation's serious food safety problems, without placing undue burdens on Vermont's small farmers, food processors and local food systems -- all of which are, in fact, part of the solution to these problems. This is something that the Congressman understands very well and his vote last week reflected that. Vermonters should be proud," Rogers said.

The bill passed by a vote of 283 to 142.